UNIT 1: E. P. GEE: "THE RHINO OF KAZIRANGA"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of E. P. Gee
- read the essay, "The Rhino of Kaziranga"
- discuss the essay and the techniques used by the essayist
- appreciate the wonderful wildlife of Assam, and the need for conservation of wildlife and its habitat.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit aims to acquaint you with E. P. Gee, one of the most famous naturalists to have ever studied the wild life of India. Edward Pritchard Gee was a pioneer in the field of wildlife study in our country. His contribution in this area is even more remarkable when you consider the time when he lived and worked. Wildlife, conservation, and such words were neither as common nor as important in those days as they are now. Consequently, Gee had no access to the kind of infrastructure that wildlife enthusiasts have today. Inhospitable terrain, unfamiliar and often dangerous jungles, tracks rather than

roads, camps far away from towns and villages, and the constant fear of disease were some of the problems Gee had to face and overcome in the course of his passion. Thanks to the efforts of this man, Kaziranga is now the brightest jewel in the crown of Indian conservation stories. Therefore, this unit tries to detail the life and work of this great man. Besides this, the unit also sets up the learning objectives that will help you focus on the key areas dealt with in this unit.



Jargon : words or expressions used by a particular profession and difficult for others to understand

Genres : particular type or style of literature, art, film, music etc. that one can recognize for its special features.

The present essay is not meant to be a literary piece. Rather, it is a formal account of observations carried out by the author on a particular species of animal in the course of his study of the wild life of India. As such, it is meant to be informative rather than entertaining. Moreover, Gee's target readers were the scientific community rather than the students of English literature and language. It is, in fact, one of the chapters of his great book called *The Wildlife of India*. However, as you will find, Gee's language is very simple to follow. Moreover, the language he uses is free from technical words, or **jargon**. This makes the reading of his essay, or the understanding of what Gee has to say, an easy task. As students of English, the interest should lie in the technique used in such **genres** of writing and in the author's personal touch, which makes it such an interesting reading.

Besides this, the essay describes the habits and habitat of a unique creature that is relatively unknown to many even today. Rhinos, which once roamed all over the sub continent and South- East Asia, today live in a small patch of safe swampland. Unless we take an interest in the effort to help the animal to survive, we may lose this precious animal for ever. This is no far fetched idea. The Indian cheetah has become extinct; the hispid hare can no longer be seen; the pigmy hog has been pulled from the brink of extinction—but only just. That too was only because of the dedication of a small group of dedicated men. Knowledge is the first step towards conservation. Conservation is the only step towards preservation- not just of the rhino, but of you and me and all mankind.

1.3 E. P. GEE: LIFE AND WORKS

Edward Pritchard Gee was not a **litterateur** but a wildlife enthusiast. He came to India to become a tea planter, but found himself so drawn towards the fascinating wild life of this country that he devoted much more time to studying it than to tea manufacture. In the course of his career the Government of India commissioned him to undertake a number of surveys of the wildlife of the country. As a result, Gee travelled the length and breadth of the country– from the Himalayas in the north, to the home of the Asiatic lion in the west, to the remote hills of what is now Arunachal Pradesh in the east. His main area of work was, however, eastern India. One of the most significant results of his study is his book called *The Wildlife of India*. The foreword to this book was written by Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru who, at the time of the publication of the book, was independent India's first Prime Minister. The essay you will read here is the nineteenth chapter of this book of twenty chapters which has a photograph of a rhino on the front cover.



Litterateur : professional writer.
Stag : male deer.

Edward Pritchard Gee (1904-1968) was born in County Durham, England, and was educated at Durham School and at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. He came to India at the age of twenty-three in 1927 to become a tea planter and was stationed in Assam. He retired in 1959. From 1942 until 1948 he served as an officer in the Indian Army and saw service in different parts of the Burma front. He was appointed Honorary Forest Officer by the Government of Assam in 1935, and he held the post until his retirement. Later, in 1951 he was appointed a member of a Sub-Committee formed by the Government of India to frame a policy for wild life preservation in the country. The next year he was made a member of the Executive Committee of the Indian Board of Wild Life. He was also a member of the State Wild Life Boards of the states of Assam, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

As a member of the Survival Service Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, he was asked to undertake a survey of the rhinoceros in Nepal in 1959 and 1963. He also studied the lions in Gir Forest, the Kashmir **stag** and the wild asses in Gujarat for the same organization which later appointed him a member of its National

Park Systems Planning Committee.

While in Assam, Gee was taken in by the breath-taking landscape, the lush greenery and the sheer variety of life that this land supported. In the course of his career as a planter, he was stationed in tea gardens all over the state of Assam. Perhaps his stint as manager of Hatikhuli Tea Estate was the most rewarding to this man, who had an unquenchable love for wildlife. Hatikhuli, with its proximity to Kaziranga, the home of *Unicornis*, the one horned rhino, gave this budding naturalist the ideal environs to study the wildlife of the area. Thus began a journey that took him to all the corners of this lush land, studying animals and birds in close quarters, under often inhospitable conditions, with little support save a passion that refused to give up.

Travelling throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent, Gee was possibly the first of the naturalists to document, for the first time ever, the immense variety of **flora and fauna** in the subcontinent. The trail led all over the Indian subcontinent; but it was in Assam that Gee was to receive immortality. At Manas, a stretch of forest that covers an area from Assam to the neighbouring Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, he discovered a unique species of **primates** that were golden in colour—except for their black faces. Thus, the world came to know about the Golden Langur, and, in honour of its discoverer, named it *Presbytis Geei* (pronounced *press-bite-issjee-aiee*), or Gee's Golden Langur.



Flora and fauna : plants and animals.
Primates : monkeys.



LET US KNOW

You will be interested to know that *Presbytis Geei*, or Gee's Golden Langur, is found only in the border area of India and Bhutan in the wildlife sanctuary we know as Manas. This beautiful creature is covered with a golden coloured fur that looks exceptionally beautiful when the sun shines from behind the animal. It has a black face and a long tail. You can see this beautiful langur at the Guwahati zoo.

Interestingly, in the course of his study of wildlife, he managed to make quite a few converts. Prominent among them was Dr. Robin Bannerjee, a doctor attached to the Hatikhuli Tea Estate, who was an avid hunter. Dr. Bannerjee used to fondly recollect how he was lured away from the gun to the camera when Gee *Sahib* showed him how 'kills with the camera gave you your trophy, but kept the creature alive'.

His travels through the length and breadth of India left Gee with a wealth of information about the wildlife of this part of the world, which resulted in his one and only book- *The Wildlife of India.* The important thing here, however, is that before Gee, no one had ever bothered themselves with the rich bio-diversity of the region. Perhaps, had it not been for E. P. Gee the world would never have honoured the likes of his followers like Padmashree Dr. Robin Banerjee. Perhaps, Kaziranga would never have been a World Heritage Site, and perhaps the rhino of Kaziranga would have been extinct by now.

A man who travelled through Europe, the U.S.A., Canada, East Africa and Asia, chiefly to study and photograph the diverse wildlife, Mr. Gee won several awards for his photographs of birds and animals in the Nature Division of the Federation of Indian Photography. His films have been screened in many places of the world, some of them on BBC Television. Many of his illustrated articles were published in such journals as *The Field, Country Life, Natural History* in the U.S.A., and, in India, in *The Statesman* and *The Illustrated Weekly of India.*

E. P. Gee never wrote as a litterateur. For him, his primary business was that of a naturalist. Yet strange are the ways of history. We are born to an age where the health of the planet is in such danger that all disciplines must come together if we are ever to save the planet. Consequently, the Gee of conservation must also serve as the Gee of English Literature. For it is only when the two become one, can we hope to spread the message of conservation to all human beings and, in the course, save our planet.



LET US KNOW

Dr. Robin Bannerjee's bungalow at Golaghat in Assam has been converted to a museum by the Vivekananda Kendra to whom he willed the property. It has a fabulous collection of photographs of wildlife, dolls from around the world, a set of priceless statuettes made from caribou antlers and a whole lot of films on wildlife that he had made- besides many more treasures. Interestingly, the dolls were gifted to him by children from around the world with whom he had interacted.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What was E.P. Gee's occupation?

Q2. What was E.P. Gee's discovery and where did it take place?

Q3. What is the name given to E.P. Gee's discovery?

Q4. Name the book written by Gee.



ACTIVITY 1.1

Select any creature that you see from your house everyday. Write an essay on it. Ideally, you should complete this activity before you read the essay.



LET US KNOW

It is important for you to remember that this was the earliest study undertaken on the rhino in Assam. Many of Gee's observations have led to very different inferences in recent researches into the life of this amazing creature. However, Gee's work remains one of the most significant studies undertaken on the *Unicornis*, i.e. the one-horned rhinos (origin: Latin *Unicornis* from Cornu 'horn').

1.4 EXPLANATION OF THE ESSAY

E. P. Gee begins his essay with a beautiful description of Kaziranga, home of the rhino, calling it one of the last unoccupied grassy areas of the Brahmaputra valley. Bordered by the Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) and the mighty Brahmaputra, Kaziranga was a **haven** for poachers until 1908. By this time the authorities realised that there were only a handful of rhinos left. Closed for shooting in that year itself, Kaziranga graduated from 'Game Sanctuary' in 1926 to 'Wild Life Sanctuary' towards the second half of the 1940s. The name 'Wild Life Sanctuary' is important. 'Game' is a word that implies animals that are shot for sport. Therefore, a game sanctuary would have implied an area where animals are reserved to be shot by hunters- much like the 'Game Reserves' in certain parts of Africa where animals are kept for that very purpose. On the other hand, a 'Wild Life Sanctuary' implies a place where all kinds of wildlife, beasts and birds, are provided with a safe haven.



Haven : a place of safety.

Soon after the shooting was stopped, nature reclaimed Kaziranga, reverting the place to an unknown swamp land. Practically forgotten by everyone, even forest officials did not venture into it on the plea that not even elephants could enter such an inhospitable area. Later, however, A. J. W. Milroy decided to stop the poaching and develop the place so that it could be visited by people.

Gee tells us on the basis of his conversation with the first Forest Officer to be posted at Kaziranga that it was full of poachers in the 1930s who had killed over forty rhinos for their horns. He humorously recounts how the Mikirs (nowadays called Karbi), who wore very brief loincloths with a length of cloth hanging behind, used to run away from the forest guards. Often caught by the piece of cloth hanging behind, they would chop this part off and run away. Rather humorously, Gee calls this part their 'tails'.

The author was among the very first visitors when Kaziranga was finally thrown open to visitors. He recalls how they went on the backs of two elephants and had carried two guns for self-defence. However, realizing that there was no real threat to their safety, Gee stopped carrying guns into the

sanctuary (or to any other forest in India) after this. As for the rhino, Gee says that they looked 'improbable'. In fact, such is the reaction the rhino invariably draws due to its thick folds of skin that look like medieval armour, its horn and its **lumbering, dinosaur**-like looks.



Lumbering : moving in a slow, heavy and awkward way.

Dinosaur : an animal that lived millions of years ago but is extinct now.

Budge : move slightly

Trot away : to run or walk fast

Tushes : large incisor teeth

Wallows : lies or rolls about in water or mud.

In the early days, rhinos were quite unused to human presence. Therefore, it was not unusual for them to charge at the elephants carrying visitors. The elephants, too, were not trained to withstand the charge of a rhino. Thus, often a charging rhino would cause an elephant to turn tail and flee through the dense grass. Often, the mahouts, too, helped in the flight. So thrilling was it to be charged by rhino that Gee describes a humorous entry in the visitors' book which regrets that the only 'charge' was by the forest department.

Later on, however, as these creatures became more used to the presence of visitors, they stopped being aggressive. Elephants, too, were trained to stand to their ground in the face of any attack. It then became clear that rhinos would charge only if they had young calves to protect. Even then, if the elephant did not **budge**, they would stop short, turn around and **trot away**.

Gee notes that on the rare instances where rhinos actually attack, they use their sharp lower incisor teeth and not their horns. African rhinos, on the other hand, use their horns as weapons as they have shorter jaws and weaker **'tushes'** than the Indian rhino. This is further proved by the fact that Indian rhinos do not keep on sharpening their horns as their African cousins do. If they ever rub their horns against tree trunks, it is to get rid of parasites rather than for any other reason. Gee recalls how Ralph Graham, Assistant Director of the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago, noticed his pair of Indian rhino rubbing their horns. His simple solution of applying medicated mud to the horns caused the parasites to die—and the animals stopped rubbing their horns. Mud is a close ally of the rhino in the wild. During the daytime it **wallows** in mud to keep away parasites and to stop flies from laying eggs in the folds of their skin.

Gee then recounts an ancient myth that explains the 'armour plating' of the rhino. It is said that, once, Lord Krishna decided to use rhinos in place of elephants in battle. However, when the creature, all covered in armour for battle, was brought in, it was found to be too stupid to obey commands.

Therefore, it was sent back to the forest. Unfortunately, they forgot to take off its armour—and so it remains until this day. Historically, however, there are records of kings who have used rhinos—with tridents fixed to their horns—in battle.

It may also be that the Rhino, with its scientific name of *Rhinoceros unicornis*, is the basis for the legend of the unicorn. Belief in the rhino's ability to detect poison with its horn and its attacking elephants are similar to the beliefs surrounding the mythical unicorn. Gee considers the rhino to be the actual 'king of the beasts'. This is so because both elephants and tigers are afraid of this creature. Tigers never dare to attack adult rhinos although, if they catch a mother off-guard, they carry off rhino calves.

The author then goes on to tell us about an incident that took place in 1886. A rhino had been shot at by a hunter and had fled wounded. Since it was evening, the hunter did not pursue the beast. Next day, following the trail, he found the wounded and bleeding rhino fighting with two tigers. Both the tigers were badly lacerated and were bleeding profusely. The hunter shot at the tigers, which fled, and then he shot the wounded rhino dead. This is a wonderful evidence of the strength, courage and agility of the Indian rhino. It is much more **agile** than an elephant and is also swifter. Elephants cannot run. They merely shuffle along at a fast pace and are unable to cross any ditch that is more than six feet wide. This is so because six feet is the maximum length of its stride.



Agile : able to move quickly and easily.

Exterminate : killed; wiped out.

There are a total of five species of rhino still surviving in the world. Two of them—the Great African Black and the Great African White—are two horned. Three more species are Asian and the numbers of all five species are rapidly dwindling. In size, the African white is the largest, followed by the Indian. In former times, all the three Asian species used to be found in India. However, the Javan lesser one horned rhino, that used to be found in the Sunderbans, was **exterminated** in around 1900, whereas the Sumatran two-horned rhino, once found in the Mizo hills, was exterminated in around 1935. Of all these species, two are grazers and they both ensure that their calves walk

in front of them. Gee feels that this is a precautionary measure against tigers or lions in grassland.

Gee next tries to understand why rhinos have failed to survive except when provided strict protection. Although some believe the creature to be short sighted and hard of hearing, Gee thinks that these animals are somewhat slow-witted and **foolhardy**. Where other animals run for cover when threatened, rhinos do not. Instead, they often charge—thereby exposing themselves further. Besides, their habit of depositing dung regularly at a fixed place makes them easy prey for anyone choosing to hunt them.



Foolhardy : one that takes unnecessary risk.

Antelope : an African or Asian animal like a deer that runs very fast.

Bellow : a shout in a loud, deep voice

Grunt : a short low sound in the throat made by animals like pigs.

Stockade : an enclosure formed with wooden parts.

Gee also notes that these dung heaps are not markers of 'territory'. Rhinos move from one place to another in search of good grazing. Therefore, they do not have any strict territory. Like the Nilgai and some other **antelopes**, rhinos use whatever dung-heap they come upon.

Rhinos are solitary creatures. Even when many of them use the same mud wallow, they come separately and leave separately. As for the sounds this creature makes, Gee has noticed a roar or **bellow**, a **grunt**, a snort, and a whistle.

A unique kind of behaviour has been noticed in old Indian rhinos. Sometimes old rhinos leave the sanctuary and stray close to human habitation. Here they are usually protected by loving villagers and become almost half-tame. Two of the more famous of such rhinos were lovingly nicknamed *Boora Goonda* and *Kan Kata* by the villagers. They were welcome tourist attractions, too. Often, visitors who did not spot any rhinos in the sanctuary would satisfy themselves by watching these old ones from a close distance.

Rhinos from Kaziranga have been sent to zoos around the world. To capture the animal, a pit is first dug in the middle of a frequently used path. It is camouflaged with twigs, leaves and grass. When a rhino falls into the pit, it is captured and then removed into a **stockade.** In the beginning, captured rhinos can be vicious and savage. But once it realizes that there is no danger, it becomes surprisingly docile. Gee recollects how one such captured rhino

used to lick his hand whenever it got the chance. Some of these captured rhinos have successfully bred in zoos.

Speaking about the mating habits of rhinos Gee says that rhino cows come into season every forty-six to forty-eight days. During this period they must be served by a bull that must also be in the **rut**. After this, a long gestation of over sixteen months follows. Gee also says that an adult rhino pursuing another usually means a cow pursuing a reluctant bull. (Other naturalists have, however claimed that it is usually a bull trying to catch up with a cow).



Rut : the time of year when male animals become sexually active.

The author fondly recollects how he has been a constant visitor of Kaziranga ever since it opened; how he has visited it in different seasons; how Kaziranga wears a different garb each season. He closes the piece with a couple of lines that are so very poetic in tone and texture that one is convinced of Gee's boundless love for this bit of paradise on earth.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. What is the difference between a game sanctuary and a wild life sanctuary?

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Q6. Why do Indian rhinos rub their horn against tree trunks?

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Q7. Why does Gee consider the rhino to be the actual 'king of beasts'?

.....

Q8. How many species of rhino are still surviving? What are they?

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Q9. How is a rhino captured?

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1.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE



Exhilaration : joy; happiness; euphoria.

Contrived: forced; artificial.

Anecdotes : a short entertaining story about a real incident or person.

Let us not forget that E. P. Gee never thought of himself as a professional writer. He was a wild-life enthusiast who was trying to record the marvellous and breath-taking drama of nature that Kaziranga was displaying every day. As a result, it would be futile to look for those techniques that are usually used by men of letters, in the work of this naturalist. It would be well for us to remind ourselves that Gee is first and foremost an observer of nature, and that he writes his experiences down only because there is no other way of recording them. Thus, what we should look for—first and foremost—is a simple directness of expression of a man who is bent on recording experience. *Secondly*, since Gee is writing in his native language, that is English, one notices that the **exhilaration** of being witness to something magnificent is communicated in simple language- direct from the heart- rather than in any universally recognized **contrived** mode, prescribed for particular effect. In fact, you will notice a tendency to use **anecdotes** and **ruminations** in a manner that is very much 'conversational'. In other words, none of the usually accepted techniques prescribed in the world of letters is to be found in the work of E. P. Gee.



Rumination : thinking deeply about something.

Weaned : influenced him to give up

Revelling : getting great pleasure from

Tomes : books especially large and serious ones.

E. P. Gee writes in a rather loose and simple fashion that seems rather removed from the terse, clipped style one expects in factual reporting. This is probably due to the fact that Gee never writes as a scientist or a naturalist writing for other such technical people. Instead, his style emerges from the genuine love for and wonder at the amazing diversity of flora and fauna he discovered in India—a discovery that **weaned** him away from his perceived calling of a tea-planter to a committed observer of wild life. He is a man speaking to men, **reveling** in the joy of the bounty of nature and bent more on communicating this joy to his fellow human beings than on writing scholarly **tomes** on his beloved wild life.

Consequently, Gee writes in a style that can easily be appreciated by scholar and layman alike. He avoids cumbersome words and expressions and sticks to a lucid, easy prose that flows as spontaneously as conversation over afternoon tea and cakes at the *Sahib's* bungalow overlooking the swamps

where the rhinos wallow beyond the tea shrubs. Besides, he has an easy sense of humour that often shows him the funny side of things. (In one of the chapters in his book, for instance, where he talks about the birds that the people of the North East keep as pets, he talks about a hill mynah that he once kept in his bungalow. These birds are wonderful mimics and can mimic human voices exceedingly well. He humorously recounts how his servants would often bring him tea or his horse, saddled and ready, without his having issued any order. His sheer joy at his servants being made fools of by the mynah is so contagious that the reader can hardly help grinning as he reads).

Besides this, doubtless due to the sincerity of his passion, there is an immediacy of experience that is communicated in such a manner that the reader is drawn into a near-participation of the event described. It is almost as though we are wading silently through the swamps with the author, and, just beyond the curtain of elephant grass, we can actually hear the snorting of a wallowing rhino. This immediacy of felt experience is possible only when the medium of communication—i.e. the language used—is at the same time simple and direct as well as shorn of any pretensions towards scholarly writing.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q10. Comment on Gee's style of writing.

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Q11. What is the humourous incident regarding the mynah that Gee has mentioned in his book?

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

From your reading you will come to learn about the life and work of one of the pioneers in the field of wild-life in India, Edward Pritchard Gee. This will make you realize how very important the task of conservation is for us. It should also strike you how this man was so ahead of his times to understand the importance of wild-life and habitat conservation.

The essay itself must have made you thoroughly acquainted with that magnificent character—the one horned rhino of Assam—and its home, Kaziranga, of which the Assamese are justifiably so proud. You would learn everything about the creature—from myths about it to the demand for it in zoos worldwide; from its habits to its habitat; from its attitude towards humans to its heroic defence against tigers, and much more.

You will also learn to appreciate E.P. Gee's style of writing though he was not a professional writer. It is a simple, lucid prose so effectively used by the writer to give the readers wealth of information on rhino and its habitat.



1.7 FURTHER READING

Not much material is available on E. P. Gee, and even Wikipedia on the Internet has only a single sentence entry on 'E. P. Gee'. Gee's own book, *The Wildlife of India*, has some information on the man on the inner flap of the cover page. For more inputs on the rhino in Kaziranga, *Indian Wildlife* by Rajesh Bedi and Ramesh Bedi is a very good source with a good write-up and spectacular photographs.



1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: A tea planter and wildlife enthusiast.

Ans to Q2: A unique species of primates that had golden bodies with black faces.

Ans to Q3: Golden Langur or Gee's Golden Langur.

Ans to Q4: *The Wildlife of India.*

Ans to Q5: A place where beasts and birds and all kinds of wildlife are provided with a safe haven is known as a wild life sanctuary.

A place or area where animals are reserved to be shot by hunters is a game sanctuary.

Ans to Q6: To get rid of parasites.

Ans to Q7: Because both elephants and tigers are afraid of rhinoceros.

Ans to Q8: A total of five species of rhino. One among their species is the Great African Black and another one is the Great African White two horned rhinoceros.

Ans to Q9: A pit is dug in middle of a frequently used path camouflaged with twigs, leaves and grass.

Ans to Q10: Gee writes in a style that can be easily appreciated by scholar and layman, by avoiding cumbersome words and expressions.

Ans to Q11: Mynah birds which can mimic human beings had fooled the servants in his bungalow.



1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. What does Gee have to say about Kaziranga before it was officially opened for visitors?

Q2. Give, after E. P. Gee, an account of the Mikirs in and around Kaziranga in the early days.

Q3. Write in your own words the myth that explains the unique appearance of the rhino and explain how and why they were used in ancient battles.

Q4. What insight does the essay provide into the mating habits of the rhino?

Q5. Recounting, after Gee, the anecdote of the wounded rhino, examine whether this beast can truly lay claim to being 'King of the Beasts'.

Q6. Attempt to draw a list of expressions, anecdotes and statements that display the sense of humour of the writer.

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